

Lung Cancer and African Americans: Questions and Answers

By the National Cancer Institute

November is Lung Cancer Awareness Month. Lung cancer has been the leading cause of cancer deaths among all Americans, including African American men and due to later uptake of smoking, African American women since the early 1990s. The good news is that treatment possibilities for those with the disease are expanding. Targeted medicines guided by powerful new screening technologies have the potential to significantly improve lung cancer treatment.

<u>Christopher S. Lathan</u>, M.D., Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, treats patients with the disease and discusses lung cancer among African Americans.

Does lung cancer affect African American men more than other groups?

Of all ethnic/racial and gender groups in the United States, African American men are the most likely to develop lung cancer and also to die from the disease. We don't know why that is. Smoking alone cannot explain the high incidence and mortality from the disease in African American men.

What causes lung cancer?

The main risk factor for lung cancer is cigarette smoking. However, smoking does not explain all cases of the disease. About 15 percent of cases occur in nonsmokers. More research is ongoing to understand the role of risk factors other than smoking.

Is lung cancer always fatal?

No. When detected at an early stage, lung cancer can be treated with surgery, radiation and chemotherapy. Unfortunately, the disease is frequently found at more advanced stages, when it cannot be cured. This is a tough disease to treat—we're curing only about 15 percent of people with lung cancer.

Do beliefs about lung cancer differ among different racial and ethnic groups?

My research suggests that African Americans are less likely than whites to think that changing their behavior or lifestyle would decrease their risk of developing lung cancer. This concerns me because getting people to quit smoking is critical for making progress against this disease.

What should the public know about smoking and lung cancer?

We stress two messages. First, if you smoke, the best thing you can do for your overall health is to stop. You don't have to quit on your own—help is available (such as the toll-free quitline 1-877-44U-QUIT). Second, if you smoke now or smoked in the past, talk to your doctor about whether you should be <u>screened for lung cancer</u> based on your age and smoking history.

What do you hear about the disease from your patients?

Many African Americans in my clinics tell me that they never thought lung cancer would affect them or their community, even though the disease clearly has a large impact on their community. I also hear people say that there are no treatments for lung cancer, yet treatments are available.

Have treatments for lung cancer expanded in recent years?

We now live in an age of personalized medicine. We can identify subgroups of patients with lung cancer who are likely to respond to new treatments. These new therapies are often better at controlling cancer and have fewer side effects than traditional chemotherapy.

Are you optimistic about our ability to combat lung cancer in the future?

I am. In the future, we're going to detect more lung cancers at earlier stages, when they may be treatable. We're also making progress in treating lung cancer that has spread to other parts of the body. And, finally, fewer people smoke today than in the past. All of these things make me hopeful that things are going to get better with this disease. We just have a ways to go.

NCI leads the National Cancer Program and the NIH effort to dramatically reduce the prevalence of cancer and improve the lives of cancer patients and their families, through research into prevention and cancer biology, the development of new interventions, and the training and mentoring of new researchers. For more information about cancer, please visit the NCI web site at www.cancer.gov or call NCI's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237). More articles and videos in the culturally relevant Lifelines series are available at www.cancer.gov/lifelines.